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Dickens in My Life – I

JOHN BOWEN

‘Dickens in My Life’ is an occasional series in which a Dickens enthusiast is invited to reflect on Dickens’s presence in his or her life. John Bowen, a Professor of English at the University of York has written about Dickens in Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit (OUP, 2000) and many articles, book chapters and editions. He will be speaking about Dombey and Son at this summer’s Dickens Universe in California.

MR CHADBAND was the first Dickens character who delighted me, particularly the mysteriously wonderful ‘What is this terewth then?’ (‘Say not to me that it is NOT the lamp of lamps. I say to you it is.’) My father was brought up a Baptist, so we went to the local Baptist chapel until I was twelve or so. Although we were sent out to Sunday school before the sermon and the baptisms (shivering teens in white robes, primed for the full immersion), I must have heard a good deal of Chadband-like rhetoric as a boy, and had at least a sniff of Pecksniffery. At any rate, those two (and Pumblechook and Stiggins) seemed instantly recognisable, as if waiting inside, preternaturally real and ready to pop out: frightening in a way, but funny too, as grown-ups often are when you’re a child and they solemnly or with ‘cow-like lightness’ try to impress you.



Phiz, ‘Mr Chadband improving a Tough Subject’ (detail): *Bleak House*.

I loved the description of Chadband's 'general appearance of having a good deal of train oil in his system' that grows into the 'considerable oil mills or other large factory for the production of that article on a wholesale scale' and then resolves itself into the entire oil Trade. Dickens has often felt strangely familiar, and writing this makes me wonder why. He's an author who writes about unhappy and insecure (to say the least) childhoods and mine was neither, although with a bit of selective squinting I can turn my secondary school into a lesser Dotheboys (the headmaster, confronted with a pair of platform shoes, shouting in broad Lancashire, as he pressed his heel hard down on the boy's toes, 'If ya wear these again, I shan't stand on your foot, I shall jump up and down on it.' 'Ya great gawp!' was his characteristic reprimand, often combined with a stiff tug at your hair). Several of the teachers were grotesques of a sort who would have fitted readily into a Dickens novel: unstable, full of bizarre verbal mannerisms and bodily tics, hinting, more than hinting, at distress, perversity, disorder, they were simultaneously frightening and absurd, our grown-up futures if weren't careful – or were too careful – about our shoes. Scary, but somehow always preposterous too, as if they all might somehow be just blown away if you could find the right words.

But I was a latecomer to the Dickens party. I think of proper Dickensians as people who've been reading him since they were children, but for me it's been an entirely adult pleasure. Until then, it was like those moments in pantomime, with me as the idiot who doesn't know what's going on, while everyone is shouting out 'He's right behind you'. And of course by the time I turned round, he was gone, like Whitman at the end of 'Leaves of Grass':

If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles....
Failing to find me, keep encouraged
Missing me one place, search another
I stop somewhere, waiting for you

Except, of course, I wasn't looking for him, and I don't think he was waiting for me. So although I didn't find Dickens under my boot soles, I did eventually get there, having spent a lot of time avoiding him, turning the other way or just having other fish to fry. Perhaps I was afraid, like David Copperfield with the stunning ale, that Dickens was too old for me and I might fall dead on the spot, or perhaps there were always friendly waiters ready to take him off my hands. As a teenager, it may have been because there was no promise of sex in his books, as there was in D. H. Lawrence, and none of the sophisticated foreign glamour that Kafka or Sartre seemed to impart when you read them on the bus. Or perhaps the books, he said slightly shamefacedly, just looked a bit too long. Lyric poems seemed the right length for me then: the spasmodic intensity, the futile passions, the overwhelming,

mystifying desires. There were no local cues or links to Dickens: Ammanford in South Wales and East Yorkshire, the two places we called 'home', have never been prime Dickens landscapes, despite the efforts of the Malton Dickens Society. Forty years on, I have a soft spot for Allan Woodcourt, a steady Welshman who ends up happily married in Yorkshire, but I don't think I'd have noticed him back then.

Not a childhood pleasure, then, nor a teenage one. I don't remember reading Dickens as a boy, although there was a *Complete Works* in the glass-fronted bookcase in the sitting room. But it was one of those editions (Odhams?) that were given away with newspaper subscriptions in the 1930s or before and designed, as far as I can tell, to put people off reading Dickens for life. Tiny print, yellowy paper, faux-leather spines, some letters reversed, odd pages printed upside down, they filled a shelf or two but no one ever seemed to want to read them. I must have tried once or twice, some rainy afternoon. My mother told me much later that my grandfather Samuel Hawkins, a great reader, when he and my grandmother first had a bit of spare money (this must have been in the 1920s or 30s, so a significant purchase for a mining family) went to Swansea market and bought a children's encyclopedia and a complete set of Dickens. Was this the set we had? There were always books in the house but I don't remember ever borrowing a Dickens when we changed our books at the library; perhaps I did. There was certainly a children's version of *Oliver Twist* published by Blackie at the bottom of a cupboard. Perhaps more surprisingly, I don't remember seeing Dickens on TV or the cinema either, except the wonderful Alastair Sim *A Christmas Carol*, one of my father's favourite films, which we saw on TV. When I was very young I saw Sim as Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* at the New Theatre, Hull, but the stand-out event was Emlyn Williams's one-man Dickens show when I was twelve or so.

It's not much of a haul, and educationally things weren't much better: every time Dickens seemed to be charging towards me, a kind pedagogue would manage to head him off at the pass. No Dickens for 'O' or 'A' level, for example, but then did I read any novels at all for those exams? It was poetry I (spasmodically) cared about, and my English teacher was mad keen on drama. At Cambridge, although I read English at Trinity Hall, where Dickens's son Henry studied and the great Dickens scholar Graham Storey taught, there was no clatter of revelation. The English faculty at Cambridge was tearing itself apart over what was to become known as the structuralism row, and I don't remember any lectures on Dickens, although there must have been some. I didn't take the novel paper in Part Two and substituted a dissertation on William Carlos Williams for the modern (1830 to the present) paper, so I've never written about Dickens in an exam. Graham, then semi-retired from teaching, taught me in my first term but only for practical criticism and he didn't give us any Dickens to

look at, but mainly poetry. With the folly of youth, I remember thinking what a dreary business it must be to edit Dickens's letters, not ever having read any. When I graduated and told Graham I was going to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham to do postgraduate work, he replied 'Oh, Sociology!' with what seemed a shocked contempt, and walked away. For the modern paper (1830 to the present) we read only *Hard Times*. Leavis was the recommended approach and there was quite a lot of having to pretend that the people in books were real and then say whether we morally approved of them or not, which now seems just about the dulllest thing you can do with a novel. George Eliot, Austen, E. M. Forster, Conrad and James seemed to be what fiction should be, although Raymond Williams's *The English Novel* and his introduction to the Penguin *Dombey* were decisively different.

Allon White, then a junior research fellow at Trinity Hall, gave us the first page of *Bleak House* for practical criticism one week; he must have been writing or had just finished his *Critical Quarterly* essay on the novel. I loved Allon (he made me want to be an academic) but I was still resisting Dickens, or what I thought was Dickens, but perhaps that was the first opening of the door. I do remember reading *Hard Times* on a train in my second year, absolutely delighted, especially with the opening scene, but not at all sure what I could say or do with it. I remember noticing the holes in it – the hole that Louisa wants to cut in her cheek after Bounderby has kissed it, the loophole in the circus. Evidently, I was looking for a loophole too.

I don't think all these failures to read Dickens were my fault entirely; Cambridge, like most English departments, didn't really seem to know what to do with him. It may have had some advantages: I started reading fiction as a lesser kind of poetry, thinking of novels as longish poems without the linguistic density and richness that proper literature should have, and then I found in Dickens some novels that had all that richness, and more. I still get impatient when there isn't much 'local life' in the language of novels – at times in the literal-mindedness of Wilkie Collins, say, or Gaskell or Trollope. Every character in Dickens is a poet of one sort or another, although when I say that I wonder if I'm exaggerating and realise that his hyperbole drew me to Dickens too. In the end, it was an odd set of weapons I stumbled on, often not from Dickens scholars at all – bits of Derrida and Chesterton, David Edgar's wonderful adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby*, some Brecht, Bakhtin and Freud – to bore holes in the critical fences ('modernism', 'realism', character, maturity, George Eliot, Henry James) that had got in the way of my reading the books. The Penguin introductions were important: Williams on *Dombey*; Hillis Miller on *Bleak House* and David Craig's fierce little Marxist introduction to *Hard Times*.

But I suspect the main reason that I came so late to Dickens was

that for better or worse, Dickens became more of a contemporary as the 1970s passed into the neo-liberal '80s and '90s: a contemporary, but not in a good way. There was a sense in my teens that the terrible abuses that Dickens portrayed were now quite past and over, that universal education, the welfare state and the National Health Service had created an impenetrable barrier between his world and ours. As the 1979 Conservative government and its successors dismantled the post-war welfare settlement, Dickens's world, the sufferings and endurance of his characters, seemed suddenly and disturbingly much more close. At that time, in the '80s, I was in my first academic job but not at all sure what I wanted to write about or what kind of academic I wanted to be. With three or four million people unemployed, it was a shockingly different time from the relative optimism of even a decade before. There was a vogue among politicians for talking about 'Great Britain PLC' and a great deal from them about how almost any problem could be sorted out if it was 'properly managed', just like Bumble on giving the paupers exactly what they don't want: 'properly managed: properly managed, ma'am'.

And every Christmas I would read *A Christmas Carol* and end up sobbing. Absurdly, it seemed to get earlier with each reading; at first, I could hold out until Tiny Tim did NOT die, then would soften at 'Bear but a touch of my hand there... and you shall be upheld in more than this!', until in the end, I could barely get beyond the first page. The socialised, non-denominational Christianity must have been part of it, reaching back to my childhood and memories of Alastair Sim. But why did it move me so much, get under all the defences? In part, I thought, from the way that it didn't pretend that what you wanted and what you got in this world were the same, in life or in fiction: we want the suffering and exploitation that Scrooge causes to end but it is only the magic of the ghosts that can make it happen in the story. It wasn't realist, in short, didn't pretend that all conflicts could be reconciled, or that the novelist was wise and clever enough to sort it all out, as other Victorian novels did. I loved the way the story really has two endings: the first, where Scrooge dies and his bed is stripped and only his debtors are happy; and the second where he lives on and changes. The first is what we know would happen in the world; the second what we'd like to happen. It was like Brecht, a hundred years early, and it got me every time. I liked – still do – everything about the *Carol*, from the colon in the first sentence ('Marley was dead: to begin with') onwards. I wrote a little piece about it for the *English Review*, then a longer one that I sent off to *ELH* (*English Literary History*). They wisely turned it down, but then a letter came out of the blue from J. Hillis Miller whom I'd never met and who must have been an exceptionally busy man, saying that he'd read it, wasn't sure if the journal would take it but that he'd liked it and that I shouldn't be discouraged. I'm still utterly grateful for that letter, which

gave me courage to write up some ideas I had about *Nickleby* which *ELH* did take. Then I found myself thinking about *Oliver Twist*, and then about *Barnaby Rudge* and gradually realised that I couldn't seem to stop, couldn't avoid him any more.